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ABSTRACT

This study is concerned with the lack of black parental involvement in a desegregated Dallas elementary school district. Data from questionnaires sent to a sampling of black parents in the school district suggest that blacks residing in desegregated neighborhoods generally maintain a low profile in the affairs of their local schools in order to guard their fragile position within the neighborhood. The information further suggests some specific fears that black parents might have about becoming involved in the affairs of recently desegregated schools. Among them are: (1) fear of white flight; (2) fear of reprisal from white school personnel or white community leaders; (3) fear of their children's misbehavior; (4) fear of embarrassment by their children's lack of academic success; and (5) fear of exposing their own academic weakness. However, a low return rate on the questionnaires and the high rate of neutral responses indicate that the validity of these assumptions are uncertain and that further research is necessary. (Author/EB)

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An Investigation Into The Absence of Black Parental Involvement in Desegregated Schools

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Introduction

Problem

This study evolved from the investigatior's concern about the lack of Black parental involvement in the school with which the investigator is associated as a parent.

During the three years of the investigator's association with the school, Black parents have been observed to visit the school only when there is a known problem involving their children or when their children are participating in a class presentation, a talent show, an athletic event, or the school's annual carnival.

It used to be that fifty percent of the PTA meeting was given to grade-level presentations, which took place before the business period of the meeting. It was observed that the attendance of Black parents at these PTA meetings was proportional to the number of Black students participating in the program. Many Black parents were observed to leave after the program, before the business period of the meeting. Those remaining for the business period, were never observed to raise questions about school issues alleged to be affecting Black children more than others (e.g., competency exams, standardized tests, discipline, etc.).

It is reported to be difficult to get Black parents to serve on the school's PTA board, the parent-community advisory committee, or to volunteer as aides in the school. The needs in these areas are served primarily by White parents and/or Whites from the community. Yet, White students are the minority in the school.

It would seem fallacious to assume that the Black parents of this school are not interested in their children's education. Many of these parents would be considered as middle class if class status were based on housing and job status.

Information obtained from Black colleagues and friends who have been associated with the district's schools, either as parents or as employees, suggested five areas of fear that may account for the behavior of Black parents as described above. These areas of fear are: (1) fear of White flight; (2) fear of reprisal from White school personnel and community leaders; (3) fear of embarrassment by their children's misbehavior; (4) fear of embarrassment by their children's lack of academic success; (5) fear of exposing their (parent's) academic weakness.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the present study was to assess the validity of the above information, provided by colleagues and friends, among Black parents of the focal school. The specific objectives of the study are disclosed in the following questions addressed in the study:

What evidence can be found that the Black parents of the focal school maintain a low profile because --

1. they feel that Black visibility would cause white flight?

2. they fear reprisal from white school personnel and/or white community leaders?
3. they fear possible embarrassment by their children's misbehavior?
4. they fear possible embarrassment by their children's lack of academic success?
5. they fear exposing their lack of academic sophistication?

Characteristics of the Local School

The focal school contains grades kindergarten through sixth. It has an enrollment of 800 students. The racial composition of the student body is approximately 68% Black, 25% Anglo, and 7% Mexican-American. The faculty and staff are about 60% Anglo (including the principal) and about 40% Black.

Within the school's attendance zone are seven moderate to high income apartment complexes in which most (approximately 80%) of the school's Black students reside. Also within the attendance zone are single family housing ranging in price from about $30,000 to about $75,000. About 20% of the school's Black students reside in this type of housing, as do most of the school's Anglo and Mexican-American students.

Three years ago, the focal school was considered to be naturally desegregated (as opposed to desegregated by busing). The racial composition among students was approximately 50% Anglo, 43% Black, and 7% Mexican. The faculty and staff were about the same as they are today. Enrollment was between 550 and 600 students. The school was rated among the top ten elementary schools within the district in terms of academic

performance. The children of several Dallas Independent School District teachers and administrators, both Black and Anglo, attend the school.

Methodology

Sample

A random sample of 167 Black students was selected from a computer printout of the school's enrollment. The information provided in the printout includes full name, ethnicity, grade, and address of each student. The student printout was used for contacting parents. In the case of two or more students with the same address, only one was used to make contact with the parents.

Little is known about the characteristics of the study sample. Of the 167 parents included in the sample, forty-five were listed in the school's P.T.A. membership. The addresses of 53 of the 167 parents were in the $30,000 to $75,000 housing area, which suggest that they would be considered middle class.

Instrument

The data collecting instrument used in the study was a mailed questionnaire to the parents of each student selected from the computer printout.

The questionnaire was developed from the five propositions about the lack of Black parental involvement that were advanced by colleagues and friends. For each proposition, four statements, designed to be reflective of the fear expressed in the proposition, were developed. This resulted in an instrument comprised of twenty items clustered into five subscales. The subscales were: (1) Fear of white flight, (2) Fear of reprisal, (3) Fear of exposing

academic weaknesses, (4) Fear of embarrassment by child's misbehavior, and (5) Fear of embarrassment by child's academic performance.

The items within each subscale were as follows:

Subscale 1: Fear of White Flight

1. When Blacks are involved in the school, Whites leave and quality leaves with them.
2. If I become involved, I might say or do something that would make White parents get "up-tight."
3. If I become involved, I might not be the nice person that people think I am.
4. The very presence of Blacks is threatening to Whites.

Subscale 2: Fear of Reprisal

1. The less emphasis I put on Blackness, the better it is for my child.
2. If Blacks keep a low profile, there is little disturbance of the status quo.
3. The political system of the school could destroy an outspoken Black.
4. The less I interact with White school personnel, the less threatening the school environment is for my child.

Subscale 3: Fear of Exposing Academic Weaknesses

1. White parents are generally more qualified to become involved in the affairs of the school than Black parents.

2. I am embarrased to let others know how little I know about what goes on in the schools.
3. I feel uncomfortable in parent-school meetings.
4. Since Whites control the schools, they should know more about how to run things.

Subscale 4: Fear of Embarrassment by Child's Misbehavior

1. If I were involved in the school my child might not feel free to be him/herself.
2. If my child would behave at school as I have taught him/her, I would become more involved in the school.
3. I am too embarrassed by my child's misbehavior at school to show my face often.
4. If I am involved in the school my child might think that he/she can get away with things that he/she could not otherwise.

Subscale 5: Fear of Embarrassment by Child's Academic Performance

1. I am made to feel that I am not doing my job as a parent when my child's school work is not good.
2. When I visit the school, I am often told about how poorly my child is doing.
3. When I visit the school for parent conferences, I feel tense.
4. I am hesitant about contacting a teacher about my child's school work.

The internal reliability coefficient for the total instrument was r_{kk} = .80 (coefficient Alpha). For subscales, the reliability coefficients were r_{kk} = .74, .52, .48, .69 and .53 respectively.

The above items were articulated into a questionnaire format to allow respondents to rate, on a Likert-type scale, the extent of his/her agreement or disagreement with each statement. Agreement with the statement was taken as support of the proposition represented by the statement.

Procedure

The questionnaire was mailed to "the Parent of" each student selected from the computer printout. The questionnaire was prefaced with a letter stating the origin and purpose of the study, and identifying the investigator as a Black educator and parent. As many of the items comprising the questionnaire could have been provocative, it was felt that such identification would lessen negative reactions.

Respondents were asked not to identify themselves, as it was felt that anonymity would allow respondents to express their true feelings and would increase the probability of a greater return. A self-addressed and stamped envelope was enclosed for the return of the completed questionnaire.

Of the 167 questionnaires mailed, 33 were completed and returned; 26 were returned marked "undeliverable" by the postal service. Follow-up attempts were not made as we had no way of knowing who had not responded.

Results

Data Analysis

The data were first analyzed by frequency of response to items comprising each subscale. We then calculated a mean score for each item within the subscale and a total mean score for each subscale. The results are presented in Tables 1

through 10. The lower the mean score for either item or subscale, the greater the agreement with the item or support for the proposition represented by the items.

Summary of Data Analysis

Table 1

Frequency Distribution for Subscale 1:
Fear of White Flight

Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. When Blacks are involved in the school, Whites leave and quality leaves with them.	3	0	9	15	6
2. If I become involved, I might say or do something that would make White parents get "up-tight."	1	4	5	19	4
3. If I become involved, I might not be the nice person that people think I am.	1	4	6	18	4
4. The very presence of Blacks is threatening to Whites.	3	8	5	12	5
	Agreement 18%		Neutral 19%	Disagreement 63%	

As shown in Table 1 most respondents (63%) disagree with items comprising subscale 1. However, the 18% that agreed and the 19% that neither agreed nor disagreed would suggest that there are feelings which might be related to the claim.

TABLE 2

Subscale 1: Fear of White Flight

Item	Item Mean
1. When Blacks are involved in the school, Whites leave and quality leaves with them.	3.64
2. If I become involved, I might say or do something that would make White parents get "up-tight."	3.64
3. If I become involved, I might not be the nice person that people think I am.	3.61
4. The very presence of Blacks is threatening to Whites.	3.24
Subscale Mean	3.5

Table 2 shows little variance among means for items 1, 2, and 3. However, the mean for item 4 is significantly different. There tended to be greater agreement with this item than with the other three items.

TABLE 3

Frequency Distribution for Subscale 2:
Fear of Reprisal

Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. The less emphasis I put on Blackness, the better it is for my child.	1	5	6	16	5
2. If Blacks keep a low profile, there is little disturbance of the status quo.	3	3	6	16	5
3. The political system of the school could destroy an outspoken Black.	2	6	6	12	7
4. The less I interact with White school personnel, the less threatening the school environment is for my child.	0	3	4	21	5
	Agree 18%		Neutral 17%	Disagree 66%	

While most respondents (66%) disagreed with items comprising subscale 2 as shown in Table 3, item number 3 seemed to have drawn greater support than did the other three items. The mean value for item 3 is significantly different from the means of the other three items as shown in Table 4.

TABLE 4

Subscale 2: Fear of Reprisal

Item	Item Mean
1. The less emphasis I put on Blackness, the better it is for my child.	3.58
2. If Blacks keep a low profile, there is little disturbance of the status quo.	3.52
3. The political system of the school could destroy an outspoken Black.	3.48
4. The less I interact with White school personnel, the less threatening the school environment is for my child.	3.85
Subscale Mean	3.6

TABLE 5

Frequency Distribution for Subscale 3: Fear of Exposing Academic Weaknesses

Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. White parents are generally more qualified to become involved in the affairs of the school than Black parents.	0	4	1	17	11
2. I am embarrased to let others know how little I know about what goes on in the schools.	0	2	6	18	7
3. I feel uncomfortable in parent-school meetings.	0	3	3	20	7
4. Since Whites control the schools, they should know more about how to run things.	1	0	3	17	12
	Agree 8%		Neutral 10%	Disagree 83%	

As shown in Table 5, there was an overwhelming disagreement with items comprising subscale 3. However, the data presented in Table 6 show disagreement among items to be quite different. The mean for item 4 is quite different from the means of items 1, 2 and 3. The mean for item 2 is quite different from those of 1 and 4, but is about the same as for item 3.

TABLE 6

Subscale 3: Fear of Exposing Academic Weaknesses

Item	Item Mean
1. White parents are generally more qualified to become involved in the affairs of the school than Black parents.	4.06
2. I am embarrased to let others know how little I know about what goes on in the schools.	3.91
3. I feel uncomfortable in parent-school meetings.	3.94
4. Since Whites control the schools, they should know more about how to run things.	4.18
Subscale Mean	4.0

TABLE 7

Frequency Distribution for
Subscale 4: Fear of Embarrassment by Child's Misbehavior

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. If I were involved in the school my child might not feel free to be him/her-self.	0	1	3	21	8
2. If my child would behave at school as I have taught him/her, I would become more involved in the school.	0	2	10	16	5
3. I am too embarrassed by my child's misbehavior at school to show my face often.	0	0	5	19	9
4. If I am involved in the school my child might think that he/she can get away with things that he/she could not otherwise.	0	1	1	24	7
	Agree 4%		Neutral 11%	Disagree 86%	

The data provided in Table 7 indicate an overwhelming disagreement with the items comprising subscale 4. However, there is a significant difference among the means reported in Table 8. The data would suggest a greater tendency toward agreement with item 2 than with items 1, 3 and 4.

TABLE 8

Subscale 4: Fear of Embarrassment by Child's Misbehavior

Item	Item Mean
1. If I were involved in the school my child might not feel free to be him/her-self.	4.09
2. If my child would behave at school as I have taught him/her, I would become more involved in the school.	3.73
3. I am too embarrassed by my child's misbehavior at school to show my face often.	4.12
4. If I am involved in the school my child might think that he/she can get away with things that he/she could not other-wise.	4.12
Subscale Mean	4.0

TABLE 9

Frequency Distribution for Subscale 5: Fear of Embarrassment by Child's Academic Performance

Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. I am made to feel that I am not doing my job as a parent when my child's school work is not good.	2	3	6	14	8
2. When I visit the school, I am often told about how poorly my child is doing.	2	5	4	13	9
3. When I visit the school for parent conferences, I feel tense.	0	0	3	19	6
4. I am hesitant about contacting a teacher about my child's school work.	0	0	1	24	8
	Agree 13%		Neutral 11%	Disagree 76%	

The data presented in Table 9 would suggest disagreement with items comprising subscale 5. Again, item means presented in Table 10 suggest greater disagreement with some items than with others. The mean for item 2 is quite different from those of items 3, and 4, and is about the same as for item 1.

TABLE 10

Subscale 5: Fear of Embarrassment by Child's Academic Performance

Item	Item Mean
1. I am made to feel that I am not doing my job as a parent when my child's school work is not good.	3.70
2. When I visit the school, I am often told about how poorly my child is doing.	3.67
3. When I visit the school for parent conferences, I feel tense.	3.79
4. I am hesitant about contacting a teacher about my child's school work.	4.21
Subscale Mean	3.8

Discussion

This study evolved from the investigator's concern about the lack of Black parental involvement in the school with which the investigator is associated as a parent.

Information obtained from Blacks who have been associated with the Dallas Independent School District, either as parents or as employees, suggested that Blacks residing in desegregated neighborhoods generally maintain a low profile in the affairs of their local schools in order to guard their fragile position within the neighborhood. The information further suggested some specific fears that Black parents might have about becoming involved in the affairs of recently desegregated schools. Among them are: 1) fear of white flight; 2) fear of reprisal from white school personnel or white community leaders; 3) fear of embarrassment by their children's misbehavior; 4) fear of embarrassment by their children's lack of academic success, and 5) fear of exposing their (the parents') academic weaknesses.

The purpose of this study was to assess the validity of the above claims among the Black parents of the school with which the investigator is associated as a parent.

Fear of White Flight

Embodied in the fear of white flight are allegations, somewhat supported by research findings, that the acceptance of school integration depends heavily upon a delicate racial balance. When a school becomes 30 percent Black, Whites begin to withdraw from the school. When Whites withdraw from the school, the economic support system of the school is weakened, thereby weakening the quality of the school's operations.

As shown in Tables 1 and 2, the items that we used to describe the fear of white flight did not draw strong agreement from respondents. However, it is interesting to note that twice as many respondents agree to the statement, "The very presence of Blacks is threatening to Whites," as to the other three statements. This behavior suggest some awareness of the affects of Black visibility on Whites and might aid in accounting for the low profile that Blacks maintain in the school.

Despite the violation of good practice in item construction, statement number 1 on the "fear of white flight" subscale was presented as commonly stated among certain factions of Blacks and Whites. In retrospect, the intended economic factor that is often the basis for such observation, apparently was not a part of the mind-set of respondents. It is conceivable that respondents could have interpreted the statement to mean that there is inherent quality in a white environment, to which one would expect great disagreement.

Responses to statements 2 and 3 clearly suggest that the reasons for these respondents to not become involved in the school are not those implied in the statements.

Fear of Reprisal

The primary reason for parents and community leaders to become involved in the affairs of the local school is to assure that the school and the school system function on behalf of the community and the children within the community. We do not have to dig far into the annals of history to discover what has happened to Blacks who have tried to make public institutions responsive to the needs of Black people.

We had resons to feel that the absence of Black parental involvement in desegregated schools was due in part to fear of reprisal from predominately white school personnel and/or community leaders, almost all of whom are white in desegregated communities. Thus, we presented items to suggest fear of reprisal aimed at Blacks in general, reprisal aimed at assertive Blacks, and reprisal aimed at the children of assertive Blacks within the community.

The data presented in Tables 3 and 4 do not support our feelings that the absence of Black parental involvement is due in part to fear of reprisal. However, respondents tended to agree with the statement, "the political system of the school could destroy an outspoken Black." There is also a tendency to agree with the statement, "If Blacks keep a low profile, there is little disturbance of the status quo." These two statements are somewhat related to statement number 4 in Table 1, "The very presence of Blacks is threatening to Whites," which drew high agreement. While we can not use these observations as evidence that Blacks maintain a low profile because of fear of reprisal, we can conclude that the data suggest some concern for possible reprisal resulting from high Black visibility.

Fear of Exposing Academic Weaknesses

It is common among Blacks who invade white institutions to feel that they must be superior to Whites in order to be treated equally; that mediocrity for them could be a kind of slow suicide. It is also common among many Blacks who invade white institutions to feel that many of their desires can be fulfilled through mere proximity to Whites. Thus, it is

conceivable that these kinds of feelings could account in part for the absence of Black involvement in desegregated schools.

The data presented in tables 5 and 6 show that respondents overwhelmingly disagreed with the statements used to measure "fear of exposing academic weaknesses." It seems that the statements comprising this subscale clearly discriminated between those who would agree and those who would disagree. Notice that few respondents remained neutral on most of the items. Agreement with item number two might have seemed too self-incriminating for respondents who would otherwise tend to agree. This might account for the increased number of responses in the neutral category.

We would have to conclude that the data provided by subscale 3 did not support the claim that the absence of Black Parental involvement is due to fear of exposing their academic weaknesses as defined by the statements comprising this subscale.

Fear of Embarrassment By Child's Misbehavior

It is alleged that white school personnel in general are afraid to discipline Black students and that Black students often take advantage of their fear. It appears that Black parents have not been successful in making their children feel protective of their fragile existence in desegregated schools. As the behavior of a student is often taken to be reflective of his/her home environment, one can easily understand the embarrassment of parents who feel that their home is being misrepresented by their child's behavior.

The data provided in tables 7 and 8 show almost no agreement with statements used to describe parents' fear of embarrassment caused by their children's misbehavior. However, it is interesting to note the response pattern on item number 2. The increased number of neutral responses might suggest that parents are concerned about their children's behavior but that this is not their reason for non-involvement in the school. This suggestion is further supported by responses to items 1 and 2 of tables 9 and 10. Responses to these items suggest that there have been some concern about the academic performance of respondents' children. Nevertheless, we would have to conclude that the data do not support the claim that the lack of Black parental involvement is related to parents' fear of embarrassment by their children's misbehavior.

Fear of Embarrassment By Child's Academic Performance

It was suggested that Black parents are more easily embarrassed by their children's lack of academic success in desegregated schools than in segregated schools. This is understandable in light of the odds against them and the attention called to the performance of Black students in desegregated schools. These students and their parents live in a goldfish bowl. Cynics and pessimists have predicted their inability to keep pace with their white counterparts. Whereas this situation would cause some parents to become involved in the affairs of the school and of the school system to assure greater potential for success, it would cause others to become passive.

The data presented in tables 9 and 10 do not support our claims that the absence of Black parental involvement in desegregated schools

is related to a fear of embarrassment caused by their children's lack of academic success. The data indicate that respondents tended to disagree with statements comprising this subscale.

There was a tendency toward agreement with statement number one that suggested that parents are made to feel that they are not doing their job when their children's school work is not good. There is a greater tendency toward agreement with statement number two which suggests that respondents are frequently presented negative reports about their children. There was no agreement with statements three and four which suggested that parents feel tense when they visit the school and that parents are hesitant about contacting teachers about their children's school work. These latter two items only drew four neutral responses. It is surprising to have gotten any neutral responses to statements comprising this subscale. A person would be expected to be able to agree or to disagree with these items, unless he/she has not had the experience of visiting the school.

Conclusions

Although the data resulting from this study do not support our assumptions about the absence of Black parental involvement in desegregated schools, we are not willing to conclude that the assumptions are unfounded. In the first place, we did not receive enough responses from parents to consider our data to be representative of Black parents of the focal school. In our efforts to protect identity of respondents, we sacrificed information that would have enabled us to have known from whom we received responses.

Secondly, the low return rate of our questionnaire plus the high rate of neutral responses suggest two possibilities. The first of these is the possibility of the existence of the suggested fears, but an unwillingness among respondents to share their feelings in the manner in which we sought the information. This could account for the high rate of neutral responses. The second possibility is that the statements comprising the instrument, many of which are derivatives of stereotypes of Blacks, could have been too obtrusive and psychologically offensive to those who did not respond, and perhaps to some who did respond with all disagreements. Initial statements that were offensive could have created a mind-set that would have resulted in total disagreement without consideration of the content of subsequent statements.

Given all of the above possibilities, there remain the possibilities that: (1) Blacks feel that they have been studied enough, all too often to their disadvantage, and simply will not readily cooperate in this type of research; and (2) the importance of this type of research is not apparent to those from whom we seek information; therefore the survey often gets ignored.

Our plans are to circulate the questionnaire, as is, in other settings in order to develop a data base from which revisions of the questionnaire can be made if proven to be necessary. Once we have developed a valid and reliable instrument, we plan to try again to seek evidence of the aforementioned claims.